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SUBJECT: PM HARPER HOPES FOR COOPERATION WITH NEW LIBERAL
LEADER

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1. (SBU) In an exclusive CBC interview on December 9, Prime Minister Stephen Harper welcomed the Liberal Party to "come to the table" and put forward specific suggestions for the 2009 budget and a likely stimulus package. He differentiated sharply the Liberals, with their decades of governing experience, from the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Quebecois, and expressed the hope that the Liberals will put the interest of the nation first and work with the ruling Conservatives on next steps to help the economy and "keep Canadians working." He said that, if they would do this, Canada might not face another election for "a couple of years." If, however, the Liberals persisted in advocating a coalition with the NDP and the Bloc, Parliament would continue to be "unstable." He insisted that the Conservatives had demonstrated they could be "reasonable" by listening to opposition complaints about the fall Economic and Fiscal Statement's controversial provisions regarding federal funding for political parties and limiting the right to strike by public servants, ultimately dropping these proposals. He claimed, however, that the three opposition parties' effort to form a coalition had nothing to do with the actual substance of the economic statement, since they had "already decided" beforehand to join together to oppose the government. He pledged that he would never, as Prime Minister, put himself in a position where the Bloc Quebecois had a "veto" over government policy, since its MPs were "not elected to protect the best interests of this country." He said that he would look forward to sitting down with the "next Liberal leader," whom he did not name (presumably, Michael Ignatieff -- reftel).

2. (SBU) Comment: It was unusual, but not unprecedented, for the Prime Minister to give this exclusive interview (especially in mid-afternoon); most likely, the PMO initiated the idea and CBC was happy to oblige. Harper showed few signs of the warmer and fuzzier politician that he campaigned as, with all his tough talk against the Bloc and the coalition, as well as occasional blunt rebukes to the interviewer for having cut him off. He even held out an olive leaf, of sorts, by encouraging the opposition -- and especially the Liberals -- to offer specific ideas for the budget and a stimulus package in hope of reaching a new consensus in the face of growing economic problems.

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